

**A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE
INDEPENDENT UNITED ORDER
OF MECHANICS FRIENDLY
SOCIETY, FROM 1847 TO 1879**

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A concise history of the Independent united order of mechanics friendly society, from 1847 to 1879 by A. Robinson

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A CONCISE HISTORY
OF THE
INDEPENDENT UNITED ORDER
OF
MECHANICS

FRIENDLY SOCIETY,

FROM 1847 TO 1879,

Being a Paper Read before Grand Council at South Shore,

ON APRIL 23RD, 1880.

To which is added an Appendix containing an

Index & Digest of the Resolutions of Grand Councils

From 1845 to 1879.

By A. ROBINSON, D.G.M., (BURNOPFIELD DISTRICT.)

(Associate of the Institute of Actuaries, &c.)



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Preface.



THE matter contained in the following pages is based on Papers emanating from Grand Council, and the Author cannot assert that he agrees with them in every respect, but they are inserted in order that the members may be fully acquainted with the many vicissitudes the Mechanics Order has undergone in the course of its career, and in its general development. To those members who have kindly placed their G.C. Reports at his disposal, he takes this opportunity of returning them his sincere thanks.

The Independent United Order of Mechanics

RIGHT WORSHIPFUL GRAND MASTER AND BROTHER OFFICERS.



THE INDEPENDENT UNITED ORDER OF MECHANICS FRIENDLY BENEFIT SOCIETY is one of no recent formation, the date of its original organization being lost in its antiquity. Since its commencement, there have been many and important changes, both in regard to legal enactments affecting such Societies as we have the honour of being connected with, and also with respect to the internal affairs of individual ones, conducted, as they generally are, by councils of representatives similar to that assembled here.

It is not of Acts of Parliament bearing upon Friendly Societies that I purpose treating on the present occasion, but on the work accomplished by, and the general progress of, our own Noble Order, towards the fulfilment of the aims which it originally set itself to perform. I use the word "Noble" advisedly, and in no egotistical manner, but in its general acceptation; for surely any federation established for the relief, even in its simplest form, of suffering humanity, well deserves the term I have applied. That our Order is designed for such purposes is so well known to you all, that it would be nothing but a waste of your time were I to occupy it with an enumeration of its objects.

There are many ways of performing the task I have undertaken, but that which appears best to me, is by dividing the subject into three parts, and dealing with each separately. I have, consequently, classified my remarks under three heads, viz:—The Past, Present, and Future of the Mechanics Order. Of the two former, I am able to speak with confidence, having the Order's Half-Yearly Reports to sustain the assertions I make; but of the latter, the Future, all must necessarily be based on deductions from past experience, or be entirely surmise.

First then, to treat of the

PAST HISTORY OF THE MECHANICS' ORDER.

The Period at which my investigation of the Order's work commences, is in the year 1847, that is, the succeeding year to

that in which the Order's Half-yearly Reports were for the first time printed in their present pamphlet form. This form, is, without doubt, a decided improvement upon the old sheets previously in vogue. I find from the G. C. Reports in that year, that the Order consisted of 10 districts, extending over the six northern counties of England, and also the south of Scotland; beyond which it does not appear to have penetrated except in one or two isolated cases, which ultimately have unfortunately proved abortive attempts to establish the banner of the Order in new quarters. The largest of these 10 districts was that of Blackburn, with 23 lodges and 744 members, and the next approaching to it was Lancaster with 22 lodges and 661 members. Others followed in succession, until we had Newcastle with 213 members, and Kendal, least of all, comprising 4 lodges and 117 members. The aggregate number of members at that time, was but 4152; and for two years the Mechanics Order decreased in number, at the end of which time, it lost, what had formerly been its most influential district, for at the Kendal G.C. in 1849 the Blackburn district was suspended for a year on account of its not complying with the rule relating to Funeral Money; and at G.C. in the following year, an attempt at reconciliation proved to be unsuccessful; so that the Order was reduced to a lower numerical state than has ever been the case since.

Still, though deserted by such a powerful district, those remaining progressed steadily, the annual increase being about 100 members. In 1850, two lodges in Liverpool were formed into a district bearing that name, thus filling up the vacancy in the number of districts, caused by the secession of the Blackburn district. In this state, all seems to have gone well with the Order for six years, when the Liverpool district, the least in the Order, (with the exception of Kendal, which has retained its original position during the 32 years under observation), dissatisfied with the proceedings of Grand Council; printed, and circulated (what was termed by G.C.) an "inflammatory document" among the members, for which they were fined by G.C. The fines imposed they refused to pay, and so shut themselves out from the Order for two years. In 1858, they were re-admitted, but at the same time, a dispute arose in the Lancaster district, which resulted in a secession of about 600 members from the Mechanics ranks.

From this period, there appears for a long time to have been, comparatively speaking, very little dissatisfaction, the Order made considerable progress, and in 1862, it was deemed prudent by G.C. to sanction the division of the Preston district, the new one assuming the old name of Blackburn district. Later on, in 1866, Preston district was again reduced, by the formation from it, of the Fylde District, under D.G.M. HALL, our present worthy GRAND MASTER. At this time, there were 12 districts in the Order,

with a total number of 8346 members, or more than double the number of Mechanics there had been 20 years previous.

After this year the number of members increased very rapidly, insomuch that in 1871, the Newcastle district, then the most powerful of the twelve, was broken into, and Morpeth and Black-hill Districts were established from lodges lately belonging to the District of Newcastle. The year 1876 was that in which the Order attained its highest numerical status, it having under its standard, no fewer than 14 districts, 194 lodges, and 17379 members. Here indeed had been rapid growth, and one might well have exclaimed, in the words of G.M. Pollock.

At thy shrines, Oh! Mechanism,
Shall admiring nations bend;
In future time thy sons shall see
Thy fame from pole to pole extend.

These lines, though uttered in the year 1854, were literally fulfilled in 1877, for at the June G. C. in that year an application was made for permission to open out a Mechanics Lodge at Cape Town, and although we were prohibited by law from having any financial relation with them, the G.C. allowed, and encouraged them in their object, by supplying them with a Dispensation, sets of Lecture Books, Rules, &c. However, at this time, it was a matter of regret that, whilst the influence of the Order was so great in such a distant country, there should have been discontentment and disturbances at home, and that too, on a subject, which was above everything, so much calculated to benefit the Order in particular, and through it, the members generally, viz: Registration as an Unity.

Unity! of which the Order had so much boasted, but which really was, at that time, nothing but an illusion, yet of which even the G.M. had so good an opinion, as to say in his address in the Order's Report in 1850:

Love be our watchword then,
Peace and goodwill to men,
Always our song!
Brothers of mercy, we
Band in UNITY!
Why should not charity
Move us along?

Unity! Forsooth! The very thing, although it was but a chimera, under which so many had presumed to take shelter, and to sing its praises, we find making havoc in the Order in 1877. Surely it might have been expected that those who had flattered themselves in their unity, such as it was, would have been the last to raise any objection to the transformation of the ideal into the real. Yet it was not so. The Government had taken the trouble to interest themselves in the Friendly Societies of the

country, and had framed and passed a Bill in Parliament, for the protection of such organizations as ours; Bro. D.G.M. Rochester had, in an excellent exposition, shown the fallacies of the original Unity (if it deserves the name), and the good results to be obtained from registration as an actual unity; and G.M. Laing, assisted by other D.G.M.'s, who shared his opinions had laboured hard and incessantly to procure the noble aim in view; nay, even more, experience, which it is said, teaches the most obdurate mortals, had afforded sufficient proof of the necessity for a change; but in spite of all this, we find that when the object of so much good was realized by the consent of the majority of the members, more than one third of the 17000 failed to agree to the proposed federation, and were consequently counted among the "secessionists" at the time when the greatest blessing the Order has ever received was brought to an issue. The cause of this rupture must be attributed to an entire misconception of the idea of an Unity, on the part of the minority, and not to any want of interest in "Mechanism," but it does appear strange, that what they had not been able to discern in 1877, they have so soon discovered since.

At that time, we find that the Ex. Com. held strong convictions that the minority would see the folly of their action, and be convinced of themselves that they were in error; for we observe in their address in the June report of that year the following expressions:—"But, brethren, we have every confidence that the day is not far distant when the majority of the seceding members will ascertain that they have been badly represented, and again ask to be admitted into the ranks of our Noble Order, it being a safe harbour of refuge for the widow and fatherless, and conducted on the most economical principles of all Friendly Societies. How far these prognostications have been fulfilled we will observe hereafter, simply remembering at the present, that the seceding districts were Preston, Coniston, and Blackburn, with portions of Wigan, Lancaster and Carlisle. In the year following, the remainder of the Wigan district unanimously resolved to "withdraw from the Order until the Friendly Societies Act, 1875 had been some time in force, and its usefulness felt and appreciated." This necessitated the formation of a new district, and subsequently that of Burnopfield was established from lodges selected from the Morpeth and Blackhill districts. Owing to a dispute between the D.G.M. of Blackhill district and G.M. Rochester, concerning some actions of the Ex. Com. and the Grand Master himself, and about which a lively correspondence, since published, was carried on at the time; the Blackhill district saw fit to add to the party who had separated from the Unity, and with the exception of a few lodges, now affiliated to the Bishop Auckland district, the whole of the lodges left our Society and endeavoured to carry on an Order, suitable to their own taste. Here, it may not be out of place to

bring to your recollection, the remarks of the Newcastle Ex. Com. cited above. We have also G.M. Rochester reiterating the same sentiments, for he says, with his coadjutors, in the Report, "We are persuaded that all those, who have left us, through their opposition to Registration, and matters connected therewith, will on calm reflection, ask to be re-united to our Registered Unity, and have their funds secured to them by law; but we hope that they will not delay their application until it is too late. We, therefore, earnestly beseech all those whom we once called Brothers, to consider the position in which they now stand, and, if they will weigh and balance carefully the advantages and disadvantages under which they labour, and compare the result with what would be assured to them as members of the Independent United Order of Mechanics, we are satisfied that they can come to no other conclusion, than that it is safer for them to abandon the insecure position they have taken up, and to build their hopes and expectations on the Rock of Unity, against which the waves of opposition may beat for a season, but which will, to the end of time, stand firm as a beacon in the storm to warn the unwary from the gulf of destruction, and to guide the earnest seekers into a haven of rest. The opposition" they go further and say "will be compelled by the force of circumstances to yield to Truth and Reason." The figurative language here employed by Bro. Rochester, is based on sound mental philosophy, and must not be regarded as hyperbolic.

Hitherto, I have treated of the numerical position of our Order, from 1847 to 1879, showing the many vicissitudes the Order has undergone on account of its members failing to agree on some of the important points of management that have presented themselves at various times. I will now draw your attention to the mortality prevailing throughout the Order during the period under notice. On reference to Statistics compiled from the Orders Half-Yearly Reports, I find that there have died during that time 3048 members, 2388 wives or widows, and 100 second wives: and representing this in another aspect, the average number of deaths each half-year has been in the ratio of 63 members, 50 wives or widows, and 2 second wives to every 10,000 members in the Order; or the annual mortality per 10,000 has been 126 members, 100 wives and 4 second wives, as compared with 151 members throughout all the societies in the Kingdom. Hence we have 26 deaths less than the ordinary number, for every 10,000 members, as given by Mr. Neison in his Contributions to Vital Statistics. Cholera and other diseases have at times appeared, and wrought havoc among our members, notably so in 1849 and 1853, and it may be, with greater effect in some districts than in others, but considering the total mortality under notice, we may make proportionate estimates, and